

Citizen Participation in Planning

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Vol. 14, No. 1

October / octobre 1974

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CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN PLANNING: A LOOK AT THE METROPOLITAN TORONTO TRANSPORTATION PLAN REVIEW

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This paper was selected from the finalists in the national planning students' essay contest which took place in 1973. At the time of writing this paper, Mr. Hulchanski was a student in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Toronto.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the rhetoric concerning citizen participation in planning has been growing at an exponential rate, while the reality of meaningful participation has been growing very slowly, if at all. Proof of this can be found in the politics of confrontation and protest surrounding nearly every urban renewal, transportation or other major planning decision. Concern for participation appears to arise almost entirely from the real or imagined failure of government to respond to the needs and demands of citizens, most of whom feel the response would have been much more satisfactory had their values and interests been seriously considered throughout all stages of the planning process. Despite all the fashionable rhetoric and all the new programs for citizen participation, the planning process has not significantly changed. In most cases, we still have participation on government terms, as defined and regulated by government for its own objectives. At issue is joint planning—planning *with* and *by* the community, and a rejection of the current planning *for* the community.

In light of this, this paper will analyze the "Public Participation Program" of the Metropolitan Toronto Transportation Plan Review (MTTPR), and will deal with the overall question of effective participation in planning. The MTTPR, with a budget of \$1.5 million and a life of two and a half years, was established in 1972 jointly by the Governments of Ontario and Metro Toronto, and the Toronto Transit Commission. The Plan Review was established after the defeat of the partially completed Spadina Expressway and the resulting impasse between citizens and government over transportation decision making for the Metro Toronto area.

The purpose of the MTTPR is to: 1) review, evaluate and modify existing transportation plans; 2) establish a process for continuous plan review; and 3) place emphasis on implementation of plans. Citizens are to participate in all stages of the review process to the fullest extent possible and the "public participation program" of the Review is to receive primary emphasis. However, to what degree and on what level will the MTTPR permit citizens to participate? How has the MTTPR altered the traditional planning process? Can effective and meaningful citizen participation take place on a broad based planning issue, such as regional and metro-wide issues, as it can on the neighborhood level?

THE TORONTO PLAN REVIEW'S PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROGRAM

A basic issue which the analysis of any public participation program must consider is: who participates in what, and how and for the benefit of whom? It is within this framework that the Metro Plan Review's participation program will be analyzed. First however, participation and the levels of participation must be defined.

Citizen Participation: A Definition Verba writes that "democratic participation refers to acts that are intended to influence the behaviour of those empowered to make decisions."¹

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Participation does not include ceremonial or supportive acts where citizens take part by expressing support for the government. Nor is it confined to the electoral process. As Sherry Arnstein writes, citizen participation means citizen power.

It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future. It is the strategy by which the have-nots join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated, programs are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are parceled out. In short, it is the means by which they can induce significant social reform which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society.²

The question of power is absolutely crucial to any discussion of participation. The phrase "citizen participation" only has meaning when a decision making body gives up some of its power to a community. It follows then, that citizen participation means much more than the condescending and patronizing jargon about "meaningful dialogue," "two-way communications," and "interchange of information." Citizen participation means an opening up of the processes of government to the people, and an end to the "closed shop" atmosphere of decision making.

A most useful delineation of the degrees of participation has been developed by Sherry Arnstein as the "eight rungs on a ladder of citizen participation." (See Table I below). Citizen participation can fall into categories of citizen power, tokenism or nonparticipation. Her eight rung ladder, though a simplification, helps to illustrate the point that there are significant gradations of citizen participation. Arnstein's ladder will be used here as a measure to determine the level of citizen participation built into the Metro Transportation Plan Review.

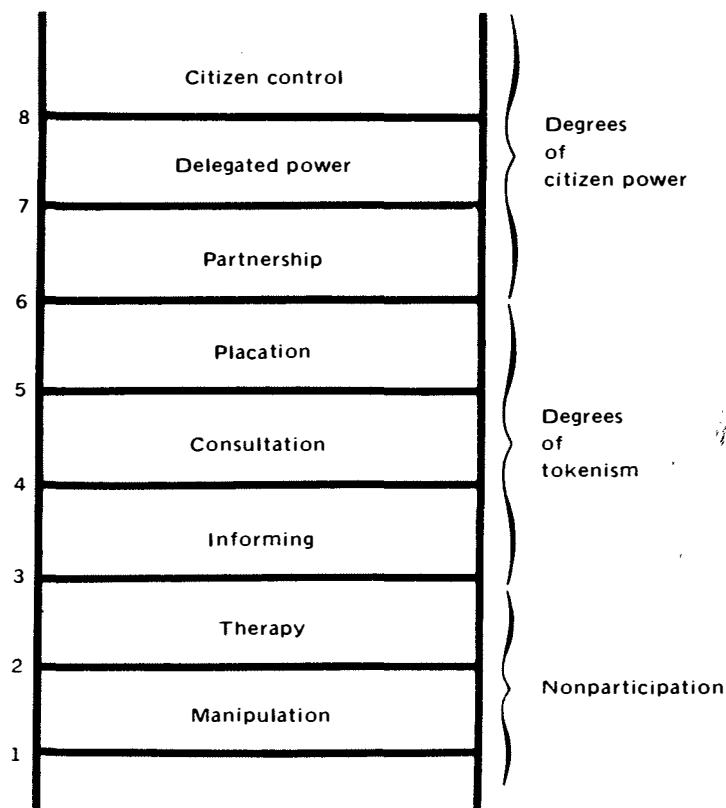


Table I

The Toronto Plan Review's Participation Program. The MTTPR's report entitled "Public Participation Program" clearly spells out the degree of participation the Review will allow. Chapter three of the report states:

Public participation in the context of the Metropolitan Toronto Plan Review Transportation Study is seen as a process of mutual education leading to an interchange of information, ideas and support among the public, politicians and planners at all stages of the planning process, in order that future transportation services may reflect public opinions and concerns.

In such a public participation program, information is supplied to the planners by the public regarding community goals, attitudes, values, preferences and priorities; in return the planners provide the public with a greater knowledge and understanding of their environment and familiarize them with the technical planning and decision making processes.⁴

The key words here are education, information and support, clearly limiting the level of participation.

Furthermore, the report states that participation "does not involve delegation to the public the politician's decision making responsibilities."⁵ This point is repeated several times. For example, listed under "Major Implications of the Program":

Confusion may arise as to where the decision making power lies; it will have to be made clear that final decisions are made by the elected representatives.⁶

This would seem to eliminate the three degrees of citizen power: partnership, delegated power and citizen control. It seems the "Public Participation Program" should more properly have been named the "Public Information Program" for it ranks low on Arnstein's ladder and involves primarily informing and consulting, something a "democratic" government should have been doing all along.

The intention of the program is to "develop an open participatory process"⁷ to be used in each step of the study (formulation of goals and objectives, identification of issues, formulation of policies, etc.) and not simply at the end of the process (e.g., public hearings on a *fait accompli*). They state that "The participation and communication process should involve the public (individuals and groups), politicians, agencies and institutions throughout the study."⁸ Isn't this the way it is supposed to be in any case? After all, the Ontario Planning Act requires planning agencies to:

. . . hold public meetings and publish information for the purpose of obtaining the participation and cooperation of the inhabitants of the planning area in determining the solution of problems in matters affecting the development of the planning area.⁹

The problem, of course, lies in one's definition of participation and cooperation. The Planning Act remains conveniently vague on this subject, and in any case, its strictures do not apply to the MTTPR.

In addition to the informing and consulting role the public is to play, the plan review also appears intended to serve as a cooling off period after the bitter Spadina battle and the subsequent impasse. Since decisions could not be made in the face of public opposition, some method of participation had to be devised to satisfy and justify future decisions, and perhaps to at least soften opposition. In this respect the program could have been named the "Public Pacification Program."

The MTTPR's participation program fails even further in that the public was not involved in developing the participation program itself. The terms of reference, the scope, the types of meetings and interactions, etc, (the "*who* participates in *what* and *how*") were all developed

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by the Plan Review staff. The report entitled "Public Participation Program," contains the details of *their* decisions concerning the methods and means by which *they* will allow the people of Metro Toronto to participate in *their* review of our transportation problems. Their report goes into some depth on how all the different types of organizations and individuals will be contacted, informed, and hopefully involved in their program. However, as Graham Fraser has pointed out,¹⁰ the process can often be more important than the product in a participatory planning process. As the staff at the MTTPR already know, there is a great amount of distrust on the part of the public towards them. Because their participatory process does not and will not appear to be any different from the usual token approach to participation, suspicion and distrust will probably remain throughout the life of the study. The major visible difference the public will see is an increased public relations job, i.e., more publicity, hand outs, meetings, liberal rhetoric, and so on. This could further increase distrust because it could be viewed as a manipulative process, since no partnership or delegation of decision making power has been made, i.e., no *real* participation is involved. Thus the whole "participatory" plan review effort may be wasted.

Some Comparisons to the Boston Plan Review. It is interesting to note some of the differences between the MTTPR and the Boston Transportation Planning Review (BTPR).¹¹ The BTPR is the only other major transportation plan review being conducted and was studied by the MTTPR staff when they were developing their own program. Some major differences between the two programs are:

- 1) The terms of reference of the participatory program in the BTPR were developed through and open process involving citizens and representatives of the municipalities involved.
- 2) The study design itself, outlining the framework for the BTPR, was a major exercise in participation. Over a six month period, the community and the authorities generated a structure for the plan review which included ground rules about the process, specific facilities to be studied, and methods and emphasis for various elements of the study.
- 3) There was a moratorium on major transportation decision making during the period of the Boston Plan Review. Here in Toronto, the Joint Technical Transportation Planning Committee (which is the parent body of the MTTPR) decided to pave the Spadina ditch, recommended building the Scarborough expressway and chose the Spadina alignment for the new subway route, all of which, for the most part, were unpopular decisions. This has not helped the MTTPR's credibility at all, even though it had no part in those decisions.
- 4) A key element in the BTPR was the establishment of a well financed, locally recruited, semi-independent community liaison/technical assistance team (CL/TA). The CL/TA staff reported directly to the "Regional Steering Committee," which consisted of 26 people from throughout the community. The CL/TA staff was recruited from the local communities, and received \$350,000, ten percent of the BTPR budget of \$3.5 million.
- 5) The BTPR was structured as an independent task force. All of the officials from the state and local transportation agencies who were responsible for the past policies and were distrusted by the community, were excluded from the BTPR.

Although it is not the purpose of this paper to analyze the BTPR in detail, it does appear the the participatory process could easily be characterized as "partnership" on Arnstein's ladder, because the citizens involved effectively shared in decision making.

In summary, this comparison with the BTPR along with the preceding analysis of the "Public Participation Program," indicates that the participation process of the MTTPR leaves a lot to be desired. It clearly stands within the "degrees of tokenism" category on the ladder of citizen participation, and thus is not much different than current levels of non-participatory "participation" in decision making.

THE RHETORIC AND REALITY OF PARTICIPATION

As the analysis of the MTTPR's participation program has indicated, official and citizen views of participation tend, more often than not, to be inherently contradictory. It is a fundamental point that participation without any redistribution of power is most often an empty and frustrating process for powerless citizens. It allows powerholders to claim that all views were heard and considered, but makes it possible for only some of those views to be heeded. It is an effective and convenient way of maintaining the status quo. When citizens are only informed and consulted, as they will be during the Transportation Plan Review, they lack the power to insure that their views will be heeded by those with power. During the Plan Review, citizens will have the opportunity to advise, discuss, dialogue, debate, become informed, and so on, ad infinitum, but local and provincial authorities retain the right to judge the legitimacy or feasibility of their opinions and advice, and to arrive at their own decisions.

Needless to say, in most cases where power has come to be shared, it was taken by the citizens, not given by the powerholders.¹² No one gives up power unless he no longer needs it, can no longer sustain it, or is forced to do so. Thus the demand by citizens for greater participation in planning is really a demand for power—power to influence and/or control decisions affecting their well-being. Saul Alinsky clearly defines what the meaning of power is:

... what is this power which men live by and to a significant degree live for? Power is the very essence, the dynamo of life. It is the power of the heart pumping blood and sustaining life in the body. It is the power of active citizen participation pulsing upward, providing a unified strength for a common purpose.

Every organization known to man, from government down, has had only one reason for being—that is, organization for power in order to put into practice or promote its common purpose.¹³

The reason citizens in Boston have attained some decision making power in their transportation review is because they not only effectively stopped construction of several expressways, but also they refused to be a part of any planning process in which they did not have some decision making power. Through their years of struggle against the authorities they had learned to distinguish between manipulation, tokenism and effective participation in the planning process; they were also well enough organized to force city and state officials to give up some of their decision making power.¹⁴

In Toronto, on the other hand, although the Stop Spadina movement effectively stopped the expressway, it in no way diminished the power of those who currently have it.¹⁵ It was an example of citizen pressure, not citizen participation. Furthermore, the success of the Stop Spadina movement is due to the Provincial Premier's exertion of his power (his power not only over citizens but also over local government). Because of the impasse in transportation decision making, the Province, Metro Toronto and the Toronto Transit Commission (i.e., the powerholders) agreed something needed to be done and had learned the hard way that citizens, (i.e., the powerless) should be allowed to participate in the planning process so they would not be as disruptive as before. The MTTPR was therefore established with its emphasis on non-participatory "participation," or put another way, "planned participation" instead of participation in planning. In the effort to stop the Spadina Expressway there was never much emphasis on redistribution of decision making power in transportation planning, and the MTTPR logically reflects this.

Citizen Participation in Regional Level Planning. It is much easier to achieve a high degree of citizen participation on local neighborhood issues, rather than regional or metro wide issues such as major transportation planning, because of the more restricted spatial base and the often direct physical effect of local planning issues on individual citizens. However, it is not all that difficult for a provincial or regional level of government to have real citizen partici-

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pation, *if* that government truly desires it. The BTPR (pending further analysis once the review is completed) appears to be a fair example of what can be accomplished. As already indicated, the MTTPR is not.

Unfortunately, the number of effective regional level participatory programs to date appears to be quite limited. So is the literature on the subject. As one writer in *Plan Canada* stated:

Reams have been written in the last half decade about citizen participation; but practically every article or book has confined itself to the phenomena at the local level.¹⁶

One reason for this lack of effective participatory planning on the regional level is the increased difficulty for citizens to communicate and to organize themselves over the larger physical area. Also the issues involved tend to be of a much more complicated and technical nature. The more important reason, however, has been the refusal of authorities to give up or share any of their decision making power, and their resistance to sharing all the information and data concerning the particular issue at hand. As with local issues, power must be taken—a difficult feat on a regional, provincial or national level.

However, despite the lack of extensive experience to date, through trial and error and with a sincere effort on the part of the government, a satisfactory mechanism for participatory planning on regional level issues would eventually evolve. What is lacking is the desire of government and its agencies to permit active citizen participation, rather than the means to do so. Citizen participation is more a political problem than a mechanical one.

Conclusion. For this reason the MTTPR is a huge disappointment. In this case all the ingredients (a major controversial issue, substantial funding, a significant amount of time, specially hired staff, and so on) necessary to have substantial real participation in a broadly based planning issue are in existence, but the opportunity is being passed up. The traditional planning process of participation on government terms, as defined and controlled for government's benefit, still remains. Some blame rests within the community groups themselves, who have passively allowed this to occur. In any case, it appears that from the beginning the three governmental bodies involved never desired or intended to allow citizens to participate effectively in the decision making process. The MTTPR has not in any substantial way altered the traditional planning process. They have merely amplified the information and consulting aspects of it.

NOTES

- 1 Sidney Verba, "Democratic Participation," *Annals of the American Academy of Political And Social Science*, (Sept. 1967), p. 54.
- 2 Sherry R. Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, (July, 1969), p. 216.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 MTTPR, *Public Participation Program*, (May, 1972), p. 15.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Ontario Planning Act, R.S.O., Chap. 296, Sec. 10.
- 10 Graham Fraser, *Fighting Back: Urban Renewal In Trefann Court* (Toronto: Hakkert, Ltd., 1972), p. 263.
- 11 For a detailed description of the BTPR process, see: Stephen C. Lockwood, "The Boston Transportation Planning Review: A Case Study in Community/Technical Interaction", *Planners Notebook: American Institute of Planners*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (August, 1972).
- 12 See: James A. Riedel, "Citizen Participation: Myth and Realities," *Public Administration Review*, (May/June, 1972), pp. 211-219.
- 13 Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules For Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 52.
- 14 See: Alan Lupo, et al. *Rites of Way: The Politics of Transportation in Boston and the U.S. City* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1971).
- 15 See: David and Nadine Nowlan, *The Bad Trip: The Untold Story of the Spadina Expressway*, (Toronto: New Press, 1970).
- 16 Michael Audain, "Citizen Participation in National Urban Policy," *Plan Canada*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1972, p. 74.